Dominique Colas (ed.): ***L'Europe post-communiste***
Paris 2002: Presses Universitaires de France, 694 pp.

Six experts, all giving courses at the Institute d'Études Politiques in Paris (or even having their background there) participated in creating this large volume, which deals with the post-communist transformation from various points of view. Dominique Colas writes about civil society, state and nation; Anne Gazier describes changing institutions and political life; Gérard Wild deals with the economic agenda during transition; Anatoli Vichnevski writes about varying demographic paths; Georges Mink analyses the post-communist society; and Jean-Christophe Romer depicts the re-composition of the international order.

The readers explicitly targeted by the book are not scholars and experts but university students. They receive a vast amount of data and information on the decade of transformation, complemented by a systematic and well-structured list of the main sources of literature, and even references to numerous websites covering all the main fields. The chronological overview provided at the end of the book provides an unintended retrospective on the length of the transformation period and the various changes the 'Eastern' populations experienced during that time. The multidisciplinary approach of the book enables one to grasp the transformation as a multifaceted and colourful phenomenon. If the French *ésprit* and the mostly qualitative narrative are added to all this, the reader will surely not be bored, even if he or she must face a great many pages and sometimes chapters that have an insufficiently systematic structure.

It is impossible to reproduce the vast content of the volume, even in brief. Moreover, the authors allow readers enough space to reach their own conclusions – this may be taken as inspiring, but it also raises many question marks. The same applies to the multidisciplinarity – there are many hints at the bridges between the specific approaches of political science, economics, sociology and demography, but a complex picture is missing (as a matter of fact, however, the story is not yet over). Unlike Anglo-Saxon literature, which is much more focused and discipline-specific, here the French scholars parallel different angles to arrive at one clear message – the road away from communism is not predetermined, there is no single route, and there are many detours before reaching the end – if there is any in sight.

The authors do not hesitate to go back in history to the very roots of communist ideology and practices. In various places, they are able to compensate for the almost complete absence of any study of the communist period from within. Paradoxically, there are former 'sovietologues' who feel the need for a deeper, insider's look into everyday life in 'the socialist camp' – probably more so than the scholars who lived there and thus possess intimate knowledge of the endless balancing between tacit compromises with the regime and the effort to maintain the remnants of human dignity. The reason behind this need, even if expressed on the outside, is probably that the former 'sovietologues' quite correctly expect that that is where the key to many of the puzzles operating in today's post-communist societies actually lies. Unfortunately, this period is outside the interest not only of economists (with the rare exception of János Kornai), but also of sociologists and even modern historians.

In the section on the state, nation and civil society, various paths are displayed. As Dominique Colas shows, the communist party-state may convert into either a state based on justice or a state based on power. The 'national question' also unfolds in different ways. It is not clear whether, as the author argues (pp. 25-26), in fact the national cultures that preceded the communist period really do not matter, since even the author convincingly demonstrates the process whereby pol-

itics became ethnicised in the Balkans, eventually leading to genocidal excesses.

In the section on economic adjustment, a critical approach is applied to show 'the penalties for speed' (as the Czech institutional economist Lubomír Mlčoch would call it) and the problems of privatisation – mass privatisation in particular. Gérard Wild stresses how much economic power the post-communist state has kept in its hands and how deep the incompetences of its managers were (pp. 350ff). Although the author uses the comparative tables of the EBRD, which show the considerable inter-country differences, his explanation sometimes fails to distinguish between the various country paths and their main pros and cons.

In the one hundred pages devoted to post-communist society, Georges Mink creates a vivid picture of the actors, social groups and forces of this structural change that represents an 'exceptional challenge' for sociology. In the introduction, he shows the opposite fates of two French concepts – while Alain Touraine's 'social movements' failed, despite their early and partly deliberate tailoring to anti-communist revolts, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'capitals' and 'champs' appeared very useful, albeit they were used secondarily by other researchers. It is precisely his thesis on the conversion of capitals that is the most inspiring for explanations of the societal transformation – and as such it has also been applied in Czech sociological literature (in the writings of Petr Matějů in particular).

Elites certainly matter, and social classes matter as well, as Mink clearly shows. However, when enumerating the various ways of defining the middle class (by income, lifestyle, type of work), it is perhaps the crucial definition – by interests, expectations and self-perception – that is omitted. This might also be why much less space is given to the middle class in comparison with the other groupings, and their role in transition processes – recognised by some sociologists while contested by others – is not discussed thoroughly. However, the author gives a clear indication of where he stands – he points out the amalgamating function of the middle class and its indicative power for the robustness of the post-communist transformation (p. 503). Many other topics are also tackled, including social anomy, the coping strategies of households, attitudes towards the regime, and people's work and life, etc.

What may be surprising for the reader are Mink's references to the vocabulary of Georges Gurvitch. This 'ancient' (1960s) French sociologist of Russian origin (he served briefly as secretary to the prime minister in Kerensky's interim government, before escaping Bolshevik Russia) is rarely quoted now, if not nearly forgotten. Although his wording sounds very dry (owing in part to the lack of French eloquence), he indeed had a closer experience of the social upheavals than any other contemporary sociologist. His concept of social class as a 'phénomène social total' and a 'microcosm of sociability' (*Études sur les classes sociales*, Gonthier 1966) may have some quite interesting explanatory potential today, where it could readily be applied to the surviving and developing networks and strategies in the post-communist era.

Last but not least, Romer's section on the changes to the international order delivers a very detailed description of important events, conferences and documents which accompanied, framed, or even incited socio-economic changes in the region. Of course, the explanation concentrates on Russian diplomacy and NATO-related events. Indeed, as the author has in mind global order and its military aspects, only marginal attention is given to the EU enlargement process, its various circumstances and possible consequences.

As the editor Dominique Colas states, the communist period has only rarely become the subject of critical – theoretical or practical – research. The space reserved for discourse and politics is left empty and is of-

ten filled instead by nationalism. The reason is that both the ideology and practice of nationalism can be easily mobilised, even more so when supported by part of the elites (p. 109). We can only add that the Czech experience shows how the selective memory actually works and how old mythologies can re-emerge in new contexts. A thorough study of transformation is thus required which would reach deeper into the communist past without clichés and partiality. This book certainly moves in just such a highly useful direction.

Jiří Večerník

Sabina Alkire: ***Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction***
Oxford 2003: Oxford University Press, 240 pp.

Growing out of his brilliant *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Amartya Sen has formulated what has come to be called 'the capabilities approach' (CA) and has subsequently, in a flood of papers and books, applied this approach to issues of poverty, human well-being and development with such energy and influence that it earned him the Nobel Prize in economics. The essential argument of the approach is that the social good should be expressed in human capabilities rather than in utility or income. That argument has proved persuasive and fruitful in spite of the paradox that no one knows just what the capabilities approach is, except in very general terms.

In *Valuing Freedoms* Sabina Alkire sets out to explain it, or rather 'to operationalise it'. That she does in a dense, deep and exceedingly learned book that draws on economics, philosophy, jurisprudence, sociology and many other sources. The CA is tested theoretically in Part I and practically in Part II.

Capabilities are about functionings, and functionings are valuable beings and doings, the things a person might value. The goodness of a person's life depends on her freedom to promote/achieve/accomplish valuable functionings. That's the guts of CA, and from there the approach can move in many directions. How should it be taken forward more precisely? Sen has point-blank refused to answer. He consistently treats the approach as pluralistic and incomplete, as nonclosed, and insists that it is this openness that makes it fruitful. Not surprisingly, others have been critical – and the whole intangibility of the approach is a provocation to anyone who wants theory to impose a strict order on the universe – but the influence of the approach vindicates Sen's refusal to tie it down.

There are philosophical reasons for leaving the approach open-ended. Well-being just is not made up of one thing and one thing only. Normal people value many things and not all the things we value are necessarily ordered on a neat scale from more to less wanted. It is just a mistake to reduce all the things people want to any single final value. An open-ended theory is therefore faithful to the reality people live in, and it is really at ordered and not messy theories we should aim our fire.

But there is also another reason why Sen's approach is deliberately messy – or so one comes to feel while reading Alkire. The approach is more an exercise in criticism than in theory building. Its foundation is fundamentally negative: a relentless criticism of utilitarian economics. When the approach started to emerge, utilitarianism was the foundation on which mainstream economics stood. That foundation had just the quality of order that the capabilities approach lacks: a beautifully logical edifice of utility-maximising human robots. The feeling of owning a perfect theory had persuaded the economics profession that it was right in all things when it was in fact wrong in many, including its chosen assumptions about human nature and well-being. It is dangerous to believe oneself right when one is wrong, and economics